

yellow hair bound her little head in great shining braids. Beneath it, a small heart-shaped face, stricken with terror and grief, stared down at them, white as ashes. "Tis Irena herself! Poor lamb!" O'Hara drove the launch across the submerged yard. "An' she alone in the cabin wid—that!"

The launch grounded on a mass of willow roots and stuck fast. The men jumped overboard and splashed to the steps. Coleman stood with bared head. His tongue blundered abominably for sheer pity.

"We saw—the black cloth. Please let us come in—and do what we can."

The girl did not answer at once. Puzzled, Coleman raised his head and looked at her. What he saw brought the blood to his heart.

She was even younger than he had thought, more delicate and frail. Her hands were clenched, her wide, dark eyes were tear-swollen, her lips were quivering. Yet upon every feature was stamped beauty—a beauty so profound, so exquisite, that it caught his breath and leaped like wildfire through his veins.

"He went away from me yesterday." Her child voice shook, her soft eyes filled. "Nobody came by, and I daren't leave him to row to town. But he told me just what to do. He said somebody would come soon. And you did come."

She led the two men into the cabin.

O'Hara stumbled across to the straight white shape on the low bed, and knelt, whispering prayers. But Coleman stood stock-still, amazed. A dull bare room: a bed, a chair, a table, a rickety piano. But on the board walls hung scores of blueprints and fragments of designs, and the table was heaped with strange trumpery—a fine microscope, a jumble of wires and screws and test-tubes and tools. Coleman peered at the inscription on one drawing.

"My perpetual-motion motor. Pat. applied for, June, 1909."

"R. D. MACLAREN."

Then he looked down at that old wasted face. The face of a gentleman, ascetic, clean; the face of a seer, a visionary. Perpetual motion! Well, the poor hermit-soul's mysteries were all solved now. All but this white, desolate child beside him.

"Pack up yer duds, girl dear." O'Hara spoke gently. "We'll be takin' you to Severn. Takin' you—both."

The girl hesitated. "But where—how—"

"There, there, girl dear." O'Hara patted her thin shoulder. "We'll give him as fine a funeral as money can buy. Preacher, an' flowers, an' all the hacks in town. Ye'll see!"

But the miserable question only deepened in her eyes.

"We—we can't. For he said—oh, poor Uncle Robbie!" she sobbed out, heart-broken. "He said there wasn't any money left. He spent the last on his new tools. He didn't even own the cabin."

"Don't! We'll do everything."

Coleman spoke gruffly. He had a wild longing to snatch the little stricken creature into his big arms and comfort her.

"Pack what you need, and put on a warm cloak. We'll take you both to Severn right away."

SEVERN was only twenty miles downstream. But it was far past noon when they reached the landing. His life long, Coleman would remember that strange, silent journey down the flooded river. Straight and long under his winding-sheet, the dead man lay astern. Moveless as ivory, the girl sat by his rough bier. Forward at the steering-wheel crouched Coleman and O'Hara. They hardly spoke. They never once glanced astern.

At last the launch grounded on the sodden wharf. They left Irena at the forlorn Severn Astor House, while they made arrangements for the funeral.

Two hours later, as they drove away from the cemetery, Coleman realized that his work was just begun. He had done his duty by the dead. But now—the living!

Irena had already told her short, pitiful story. She was MacLaren's grand-niece. Her father had been a bookkeeper in a St. Louis foundry, her mother a young

school-teacher, a New England girl, "Sarah Lord Peabody, of Haverhill," without near kinsfolk. When she was twelve, both parents had been killed in a tenement fire. Then MacLaren had adopted her, and taught her to keep his house. He had taught her other things, too, she added shyly: to play a little, to speak a little French and German, to read aloud from his shabby trunkful of classics. He had been kind, but very strict. He had lived in terror of his perpetual-motion motor being stolen—hence their hermit life.

"I can't take her back to that hole of a hotel." Coleman studied her face, so wan and sad, yet so beautiful that he felt a sudden awe, boyish, chivalric. What a flower-thing she was, this lone little waif! She was like—in a flash, Coleman remembered, with a curious shy delight—that old, old picture of his mother, taken in the decorous seventies: her little slim, unformed body; her braided hair; her soft, dark eyes.

If only his mother were at home, he'd pack Irena off to her. She would know just what to do. But she was in Zürich, where the younger boys were at school. Failing that, he could take Irena to some good school in St. Louis. But for to-night—where, in this dingy, half-drowned place, could he put the child?

"Ye'll not be takin' her back to that low-flung tavern," whispered O'Hara. "An' the preacher told me he'd gladly take her, but his two kids is down wid measles, an' the mistress wore out entirely. An' the sexton's folks is drowned out of house an' home, so they're sleepin' at his wife's father's. Now, where in the nation—"

"The minister will give me a list of his parishioners. Of course, some one of the church ladies will take her in for to-night."

"Why 'of course'?" muttered O'Hara grimly.

WHY indeed? At ten o'clock that night Coleman bolted into the little station waiting-room, where Irena sat, her lashes drooping, the faithful O'Hara beside her. "Did ye find—" O'Hara began. Then he stopped, startled by the black rage in the boy's face.

"I found—hell!" Coleman bit the words off, between gasps of fury. Red sparks blazed in his heavy-lidded eyes. "Those worthy Severn women! Those—those foul-mouthed old harridans! They'd 'like to oblige us,' but they 'really hadn't room.' Every last eat whined the same tune. And when I'd beg 'em to let her sleep on the hat-rack or the kitchen floor—'N-no; we don't know anything against her. But Mr. MacLaren was very peculiar. And there has been talk.' Talk!"

"Yis, talk. 'Tis the leadin' product of this slimy little town! But we're wastin' time jawin', an' this child so beat out she can't lift her sweet head."

"But what can we do with her?"

"Sure, sir, there's one chance left. Lilian de Montmorency."

"Lilian de Montmorency! That showboat woman!" Coleman snorted.

He had a vivid sight of the fair Lilian as she had waved to him that morning—her coarse figure, her bedizened hair, her bold, gay, painted face.

"Sweet place, that, to take Irena!"

"Well, it'd be decent, sir. An' a roof over her tired head."

Coleman began to argue. Then he yielded, disgusted but beaten. Gently he roused Irena. Dazed with sleep, she stumbled obediently beside him down the endless black shore to the huge dim bulk of *Wonderland*.

Lilian de Montmorency herself answered their hail. Big, bossy, and competent, she trailed a lurid scarlet satin kimono out on the guards, and summoned them across the gang-plank. Big and serene and vulgar from bleached coronal to scarlet slippers, she heard Coleman's unwilling request.

"You say her guardian died yesterday; and was buried to-day; and the church ladies don't want her. H'm!" Her narrow blue eyes pried into his sullen face. "Well, I don't cotton much to that church-lady gang. I reckon she'll find a roof here, all right—as long as she wants it, too."

She thrust out a big, glittering hand,

and pulled Irena into the full light. The gesture was comically uncouth, yet it was not ungentle. And the shrewd eyes she bent on the girl were honestly kind.

"She'll be safe here, gentlemen. You two pike along now. Good night."

And she led Irena into the cabin.

VAGUELY thankful, dog-tired to their Samaritan bones, Coleman and O'Hara tramped away. Coleman fell asleep planning to go back to *Wonderland* by day-break, and send Irena to the school in St. Louis by the first train. But at midnight a messenger roused him. The up-river levee had broken again. He and O'Hara must hurry back to the contract.

"Anyhow, I'll start her north at six to-night," Coleman thought.

But at six that night he lay limp and unconscious, while the chief engineer blistered the wires with demands for a surgeon, a trained nurse, a special tug to rush Coleman and his broken leg to the Memphis hospital.

The leg healed rapidly. Meanwhile, Coleman's nurse earned a martyr's crown. Every day he dictated a letter of instructions to Miss de Montmorency concerning "my ward." He sent her a check for Irena's expenses. He even ordered a warm sweater and heavy shoes for the girl. He fumed and fussed and worried. In the innocence of his heart, he was almost pompously paternal.

To all of his commands Lilian made but one reply—a truculent purple scrawl on a lurid lilac sheet:

Mr. Dudley Coleman, Esq., O. E.

Dear Sir: Yrs. of 5th, 7th, 8th, 10th, & 12th rec'd. Irena is well. She acts contented. You need not have sent that swetter. I had already got her plenty clothes myself. Also Grogan had got her shoes & raincoat. I return your check. *Wonderland* is not a hotel. It is a private home.

N. B.—Thanks for advice, etc. I don't need no cub engineer to tell me how to take care of my company. Yrs. respectfully,

L. DE MONTMORENCY.

Young Mr. Coleman of Beacon Street lay back on his pillows and howled. He was still weak and hilarious when O'Hara tiptoed in. O'Hara spelled out the letter solemnly.

"The lady's what ye might call outspoken, sir."

"Quite. But she is evidently treating Irena well. And by next week I'll be able to go down and take the child away."

"Take her away, is it?" A queer glint awoke in O'Hara's eye. "Away from Lilian de Montmorency? A childless woman wid a jaw like a pavin'-brick, an' a timper of fire an' tow, an' a heart bigger than the two big fists of her? Well, sir, I wish ye luck!"

With which cryptic farewell he tiptoed out.

Coleman paid little heed. He was already drafting a letter to the principal of the St. Louis school, outlining his ward's course of study.

TWO weeks later, Coleman, still leaning on his cane, but a personable young giant every inch, walked up *Wonderland's* gang-plank. In his pocket reposed the principal's staid note, in which she acknowledged his payment of Irena's first-term tuition.

All Summer County swarmed on the wide decks, for *Wonderland* was giving "East Lynne." Half way down the crammed little auditorium, Lilian recognized him, with a friendly whoop. She strode beaming up the aisle; but he caught a queer, furtive gleam in her narrow eyes.

"Well, Mr. Coleman! Hooray for you! Took some nerve to drag that game leg down-river, hey? Grogan and me will count it a compliment that you came to see me in 'East Lynne.' You'll want to see Irena, too. You'd never believe how that kid has spunked up. Irena, hon, look who's here!"

From behind the papier-mâché palms came a hurrying little figure. Coleman's stick clattered to the floor.

Lilian had done her two-fisted best for the girl. Already Irena's thin cheeks had filled, her color had deepened, her frail little body was straighter, stronger. This much he saw with a rush of gratitude. Then a glaze of horror settled on his face.

Irena's fair locks were loosed from their Gretchen braids, and piled in a puffed and wiggly stack. Her soft baby throat was bared to the gaping eyes of Summer County. Her thin little hands glittered even as Lilian's own. Crime of crimes, her silken lashes were beaded thick, and a smear of raw pink daubed her chin and made high lights on both cheeks. Yet, through all this desecration, her beauty shone out on him unsmirched, a white star.

"Ain't she the peach, since I toned her up?" said Lilian simply. Honest glad achievement rang in her voice.

Irena turned to her. Between the two there passed a glance of such illumined meaning that Coleman stared. Lilian's bold eyes glowed with mother-tenderness. But the girl looked up with adoration, a passion of profoundest love, almost of reverence.

"Guess I was right, Mr. Coleman. I didn't need no smart Aleck of a C. E. to teach me how to make a lady out of Irena!"

She laughed proudly and gayly.

"Run along to your piano, hon. Time the curtain went up. You'll stay to supper, Mr. Coleman?" Again that wary gleam awoke. "We want an hour's visit before you must go back."

Coleman accepted with cordial aplomb. Three mortal hours he sat through Lady Isabel's joys and sorrows. Next him, a fat old lady, in a plush coat that smelled of peppermint, wept intermittently and leaned on his shoulder at emotional moments. Before him, two mothers in Israel chewed their snuff-sticks while the lights were low; across the aisle, a red-headed baby roared without ceasing. The close little room steamed. Coleman's leg pained him infernally. He set his teeth and endured.

SUPPER was set in a tight little coop off the galley. All *Wonderland* sat down: the hot, tired band, the blowsy character woman, the cheery fifth-rate juvenile, the frayed, leering old "heavy." In all his Brahmin days, young Coleman had never sat at meat with such a Bedlam crew.

Irena sat at Lilian's right, safeguarded by her own loveliness in the midst of the hairy rout. Coleman shuddered. Tomorrow, thank heaven, he would take his flower of a girl away and put her in proper hands. His chest expanded. He could not have felt more altruistic, more paternal, had he been fifty-five and worn side-whiskers.

Supper over, Lilian led the way to her sitting-room.

"Run bring your new shirt-waist, Irena. I want Mr. Coleman to see how handy you're gettin' with your needle. Next time he comes, you and I must show him how I've taught you to fence. And dance, too. She'll make a better soft-shoe than me, Mr. Coleman, give her time."

Her words were as mild as milk, but her blue eyes snapped and her voice rang challenge.

Coleman straightway took up that challenge.

"Irena and I are deeply in your debt, Miss de Montmorency. I have come now to pay that debt. And I shall take Irena to St. Louis to-night."

There was a pause. Irena threw back her head like a deer. Her small face was chalk-white, stunned. Lilian did not stir. Her florid face hardened. Her heavy jaw set like granite. At last she spoke. Her voice was almost a jeer.

"Oho! You want to pay Irena's debts. She doesn't owe one cent. And you'll take her to St. Louis to-night. Well, son, guess again. Irena stays right here. Get that?"

Coleman drew a tingling breath. He spoke with suave control.

"Really, Miss de Montmorency! Do you not forget my claim?"

"Your claim? On Irena? Because you gave poor MacLaren decent burial, does that give you a strangle-hold on Irena—hey?"

Coleman gulped.

"Hardly that. But I am interested in her welfare. I wish to give her a good home, and an education, and—and every